

GOD IS AN IRON

By Spider Robinson

I smelled her before I saw her. Even so, the first sight of her was shocking. She was sitting in a tan plastic-surfaced armchair, the kind where the front comes up as the back goes down. It was back as far as it would go. It was placed beside the large living-room window, whose curtains were drawn. A plastic block table next to it held a digital clock, a dozen unopened packages of Peter Jackson cigarettes, a glass jar full of packs of matches, an empty ashtray, a full vial of cocaine, and . a lamp with a bulb of at least 150 watts. It illuminated her with brutal clarity.

She was naked. Her skin was the color of vanilla pudding. Her hair was in rats, her nails unpainted and untended, some overlong and some broken. There was dust on her. She sat in a ghastly sludge of feces and urine. Dried vomit was caked on her chin and between her breasts and down her ribs to the chair.

These were only part of what I had smelled. The predominant odor was of fresh baked bread. It is the smell of a person who is starving to death. The combined effluvia had prepared me to find a senior citizen, paralyzed by a stroke or some such crisis.

I judged her to be about twenty-five years old.

I moved to where she could see me, and she did not see me. That was probably just as well, because I had just seen the two most horrible things. The first was the smile. They say that when the bomb went off at Hiroshima, some people's shadows were baked onto walls by it. I think that smile got baked on the surface of my brain in much the same way. I don't want to talk about that smile.

The second most horrible thing was the one that explained all the rest. From where I now stood I could see a triple socket in the wall beneath the window. Into it were plugged the lamp, the clock, and her.

I knew about wire heading, of course-I had lost a couple of acquaintances and one friend to the juice. But I had never seen a wirehead. It is by definition a solitary vice, and all the public usually gets to see is a sheeted figure being carried out to the wagon.

The transformer lay on the floor beside the chair where it had been dropped. The switch was on, and the timer had been jiggered so that instead of providing one five- or ten- or fifteen-

second jolt per hour it allowed continuous flow. That timer is required by law on all juice rigs sold, and you need special tools to defeat it. Say, a nail file. The input cord was long, fell in crazy coils from the wall socket. The output cord disappeared beneath the chair, but I knew where it ended. It ended in the tangled snarl of her hair, at the crown of her head, ended in a miniplug. The plug was snapped into a jack surgically implanted in her skull, and from the jack tiny wires snaked their way through the wet jelly to the hypothalamus, to the specific place in the medial forebrain bundle where the major pleasure center of her brain was located. She had sat there in total transcendent ecstasy for at least five days.

I moved, finally. I moved closer, which surprised me. She saw me now, and impossibly the smile became a bit wider. I was marvelous. I was captivating. I was her perfect lover. I could not look at the smile; a small plastic tube ran from one corner of the smile and my eyes followed it gratefully. It was held in place by small bits of surgical tape at her jaw, neck, and shoulder, and from there it ran in a lazy

curve to the big fifty-liter water-cooler bottle on the floor. She had plainly meant her suicide to last: She had arranged to die of hunger rather than thirst, which would have been quicker. She could take a drink when she happened to think of it; and if she forgot, what the hell.

My intention must have showed on my face, and I think she even understood it-the smile began to fade. That decided me. I moved before she could force her neglected body to react, whipped the plug out of the wall and stepped back warily.

Her body did not go rigid as if galvanized. It had already been so for many days. What it did was the exact opposite, and the effect was just as striking. She seemed to shrink. Her eyes slammed shut. She slumped. Well, I thought, it'll be a long day and night before she can move a voluntary muscle again, and then she hit me before I knew she had left the chair, breaking my nose with the heel of one fist and bouncing the other off the side of my head. We cannoned off each other and I managed to keep on my feet; she whirled and grabbed the lamp. Its cord was stapled to the floor and would not yield, so she set her feet and yanked and it snapped off clean at the base. In near-total darkness she raised the lamp on high and came to me, and I lunged inside the arc of her swing and punched her in the solar plexus. She said guff! and went down.

I staggered to a couch and sat down and felt my nose and fainted.

I don't think I was out very long. The blood tasted fresh. I woke with a sense of terrible urgency. It took me a while to work out why. When someone has been simultaneously starved and unceasingly stimulated for days on end, it is not the best idea in the world to depress that someone's respiratory center. I lurched to my feet.

It was not completely dark; there was a moon somewhere out there. She lay on her back, arms at her side, perfectly relaxed. Her ribs rose and fell in great slow swells. A pulse showed strongly at her throat. As I knelt beside her she began to snore, deeply and rhythmically.

I had time for second thoughts, now. It seemed incredible that my impulsive action had not killed her. Perhaps that had been my subconscious intent. Five days of wireheading alone should have killed her, let alone sudden cold turkey.

I probed in the tangle of hair, found the empty jack. The hair around it was dry. If she hadn't torn the skin in yanking herself loose, it was unlikely that she had sustained any more serious damage within. I continued probing, found no soft places on the skull. Her forehead felt cool and sticky to my hand. The fecal smell was overpowering the baking bread now, sourly fresh.

There was no pain in my nose yet, but it felt immense and pulsing. I did not want to touch it, or to think about it. My shirt was soaked with blood; I tossed it into a corner. It took everything I had to lift her. She was unreasonably heavy, and I have carried drunks and corpses. There was a hall off the living room, and all halls lead to a bathroom. I headed that way in a clumsy staggering trot, and just as I reached the deeper darkness, with my pulse at its maximum, my nose woke up and began screaming. I nearly dropped her then and clapped my hands to my face; the temptation was overwhelming. Instead I

whimpered like a dog and kept going. Childhood feeling: runny nose you can't wipe. At each door I came to teetered on one leg and kicked it open, and the third one gave the right small-room, acoustic tile echo. The light switch was where they almost always are; I rubbed it on with my shoulder and the room flooded with light.

Large aquamarine tub. Styrofoam recliner pillow at the head end, nonslip bottom. Aquamarine sink with ornate handles, cluttered with toiletries and cigarette butts and broken shards of mirror from the medicine cabinet above. Aquamarine commode, lid up and seat down. Brown throw rug, expensive. Scale shoved back in a corner. I made a massive effort and managed to set her reasonably gently in the tub. I adjusted her head, fixed the chinstrap. I held both feet away from the faucet until I had the water adjusted, and then left with one hand on my nose and the other beating against my hip, in search of her liquor.

There was plenty to choose from. I found some Metaxa in the kitchen. I took great care not to bring it near my nose, sneaking it up on my mouth from below. It tasted like burning lighter fluid and made sweat spring out on my forehead. I found a roll of paper towels, and on my way back to the bathroom I used a great wad of them to swab most of the sludge off the chair and rug. There was a growing pool of water siphoning from the plastic tube, and I stopped that. When I got back to the bathroom the water was lapping over her bloated belly, and horrible tendrils were weaving up from beneath her. It took three rinses before I was,

satisfied with the body. I found a hose-and spray under the sink that mated with the tub's faucet, and that made the hair easy.

I had to dry her there in the tub. There was only one towel, none too clean. I found a fir staid spray that incorporated a good topical anesthetic, and I put it on the sores on her back and butt. I had located her bedroom on the way to the Metaxa. Wet hair slapped my arm as I carried her there. She seemed even heavier, as though she had become waterlogged. I eased the door shut behind me and tried the light switch trick again, and it wasn't there. I moved forward into a footlocker and lost her and went down amid multiple crashes, putting all my attention into guarding my nose. She made no sound at all, not even a grunt.

The light switch turned out to be a pull chain over the bed. She was on her side, still breathing slow and deep. I wanted to punt her up onto the bed. My nose was a blossom of pain. I nearly couldn't lift her the third time. I was moaning with frustration by the time I had her on her left side on the king-size mattress. It was a big brass four-poster bed, with satin sheets and pillowcases, all dirty. The blankets were shoved to the bottom. I checked her skull and pulse again, peeled up each eyelid and found uniform pupils. Her forehead and cheek still felt cool, so I covered her. Then I kicked the footlocker clear into the corner, turned out the light, and left her snoring like a chainsaw.

Her vital papers and documents were in her study, locked in a strongbox on the closet shelf. It was an expensive box, quite sturdy and proof against anything short of nuclear explosion. It had a combination lock with all of twenty-seven possible

combinations. It was stuffed with papers. I laid her life out on her desk like a losing hand of solitaire and studied it with a growing frustration.

Her name was Karen Shavitski, and she used the name Karyn Shaw, which I thought phony. She was twenty-two. Divorced her parents at fourteen, uncontested no-fault. Since then she had been, at various times, waitress, secretary to a lamp salesman, painter, freelance typist, motorcycle mechanic, library assistant, and unlicensed masseuse. The most recent paycheck stub was from The Hard Corps, a massage parlor with a cut-rate reputation. It was dated eight months ago. Her bank balance combined with paraphernalia I'd found in the closet to tell me that she was currently self-employed as a bootlegger, a cocaine dealer. The richness of the apartment and furnishings told me that she was a foolish one; even if the narcs missed her, very shortly the IRS was going to come down on her like a ton of bricks. Perhaps subconsciously she had not expected to be around.

Nothing there; I kept digging. She had attended community college for one semester, as an art major, and dropped out failing. She had defaulted on a lease three years ago. She had wrecked a car once and been shafted by her insurance company. Trivia. Only one major trauma in recent years: A year and a half ago

she had contracted out as host-mother to a couple named Lombard/Smyth. It was a pretty good fee-she had good hips and the right rare blood type-but six months into the pregnancy they had caught her using tobacco and canceled the contract. She fought, but they had photographs. And better lawyers, naturally. She had to repay the advance, and pay for the abortion, of course, and got socked for court costs besides.

It didn't make sense. To show clean lungs at the physical, she had to have been off cigarettes for at least three to six months. Why backslide, with so much at stake? Like the minor traumas, it felt more like an effect than a cause. Self-destructive behavior. I kept looking.

Near the bottom I found something that looked promising. Both her parents had been killed in a car smash when she was eighteen. Their obituary was paper-clipped to her father's will. It was one of the most extraordinary documents I've ever read. I could understand an angry father cutting off his only daughter without a dime. But what he had done was worse. Much worse.

Dammit, it didn't work either. So-there suicides don't wait four years. And they don't use such a garish method either. It devalues the tragedy. I decided it had to be either a very big and dangerous coke deal gone bad, or a very reptilian lover. No, not a coke deal. They'd never have left her in her own apartment to die the way she wanted to. It could not be murder: Even the most unscrupulous wire surgeon needs an awake, consenting subject to place the wire correctly.

A lover, then. I realized, pleased with my sagacity, and irritated as hell. I didn't know why. I chalked it up to my nose. It felt as though a large shark with rubber teeth was rhythmically biting it as hard as he could. I shoveled the papers back into the box, locked and replaced it, and went to the bathroom.

Her medicine cabinet would have impressed a pharmacist. She had lots of allergies. It took me five minutes to find aspirin. I took four. I picked the largest shard of mirror out of the sink, propped it on the

septic tank, and sat down backward on the toilet. My nose was visibly displaced to the right, and the swelling was just hitting its stride. There was a box of kleenex on the floor. I ripped it apart, took out all the tissues, and stuffed them into my mouth. Then I grabbed my nose with my right hand and tugged out and to the left, flushing the toilet simultaneously with my left hand. The flushing coincided with the scream, and my front teeth met through the kleenex. When I could see again the nose looked straight and my breathing was unimpaired. I gingerly washed my face, and then hands, and left. A moment later I returned; something had caught my eye. It was the glass-and-toothbrush holder. There was only one toothbrush in it. I looked through the medicine chest again and noticed this time that there was no shaving cream, no razor either manual or electric, no masculine toiletries of any kind. All the prescriptions were in her name

and seemed perfectly legitimate.

I went thoughtfully to the kitchen, mixed myself a Preacher's Downfall by moonlight, and took it to her bedroom. The bedside clock said five. I lit a match, moved the footlocker in front of an armchair, sat down, and put my feet up. I sipped my drink and listened to her snore and watched her breathe in the feeble light of the clock. I decided to run through all the possibilities, and as I was formulating the first one day-light smacked me hard in the nose.

My hands went up reflexively, and I poured my drink on my head and hurt my nose more. I wake up hard in the best of times. She was still snoring. I nearly threw the empty glass at her.

It was just past noon now; light came strongly through the heavy curtains, illuminating so much mess and disorder that I could not decide whether she had thrashed her bedroom herself or it had been tossed by a pro. I finally settled on the former: The armchair I'd slept on was intact. Or had the pro found what he wanted before he'd gotten that far?

I gave it up and went to make myself breakfast.

It took me an hour or two to clean up and air out the living room. The cord and transformer went down the oubliette, along with most of the perished items from the fridge. The dishes took three full cycles for each load, a couple of hours all told. I passed the time vacuuming and dusting and snooping, learning nothing more of significance. I was making up a shopping list about fifteen minutes later when I heard her

moan. I reached her bedroom door in seconds, waited in the doorway with both hands in sight, and said slowly and clearly, "My name is Joseph Templeton, Karen. I am a friend. You are all right now."

Her eyes were those of a small tormented animal.

"Please don't try to get up. Your muscles won't work properly and you may hurt yourself."

No answer.

"Karen, are you hungry?"

"Your voice is ugly," she said despairingly, and her own voice was so hoarse I winced. "My voice is ugly." She sobbed gently. "It's all ugly." She screwed her eyes shut.

She was clearly incapable of movement. I told her I would be right back and went to the kitchen. I made up a tray of clear strong broth, unbuttered toast, tea with too much sugar, and saltine crackers. She was staring at the ceiling when I got back. I put the tray down, lifted her, and made a backrest of pillows.

"I want a drink."

"After you eat," I said agreeably.

"Who're you?"

"Mother Templeton. Eat."

"The soup, maybe. Not the toast." She got about half of it down, accepted some tea. I didn't want to overfill her. "My drink."

"Sure thing." I took the tray back to the kitchen, finished my shopping list, put away the last of the dishes, and put a frozen steak into

the oven for my lunch. When I got back she was fast asleep.

Emaciation was near total; except for breasts and bloated belly she was all bone and taut skin. Her pulse was steady. At her best she would not have been very attractive by conventional standards. Passable. Too much waist, not enough neck, upper legs a bit too thick for the rest of her. It's hard to evaluate a starved and unconscious face, but her jaw was a bit too square, her nose a trifle hooked, her blue eyes just the least little bit too far apart. Animated, the face might have been beautiful-any set of features can support beauty-but even a superb makeup job could not have made her pretty. There was an old bruise on her chin. Her hair was sandy blond, long and thin; it had dried in snarls that would take an hour to comb out. Her breasts were magnificent, and that saddened me. In this world, a woman whose breasts are her best feature is in for a rough time.

I was putting together a picture of a life that would have depressed anyone with the sensitivity of a rhino. Back when I had first seen her, when her features were alive, she had looked sensitive. Or had that been a trick of the juice? Impossible to say now.

But damn it all to hell, I could find nothing to really explain the socket in her skull. You can hear worse life stories in any bar, on any street corner. I was prepared to match her scar for scar myself. Wireheads are usually addictive personalities, who decide at last to skip the small shit. There were no tracks on her anywhere, no nasal damage, no sign that she used any of the coke she sold. Her work history, pitiful and fragmented as it was, was too steady for any kind of serious jones; she had undeniably been hitting the sauce hard lately, but only lately. Tobacco seemed to be her only serious addiction.

That left the hypothetical bastard lover. I worried at that for a while to see if I could make it fit. Assume a really creatively sadistic son of a bitch had gutted her like a trout, for the pure fun of it. You can't do that to someone as a visitor or even a guest; you have to live with them. So he did a world-class job of crippling a lady who by her history is a tough little cookie, and when he had broken her he vanished. Leaving not even so much as empty space in drawers, closets, or medicine chest. Unlikely. So perhaps after he was gone she scrubbed all traces of him out of the apartment-and then discovered that there is only one really good way to scrub memories. No, I couldn't picture such a sloppy housekeeper being so efficient.

Then I thought of my earlier feeling that the bedroom might have been tossed by a pro, and my blood turned to ice water. Suppose she wasn't a sloppy housekeeper? The jolly sadist returns unexpectedly for one last nibble. And finds her in the living room, just as I did. And leaves her there.

After five minutes' thought I relaxed. That didn't parse either. True, this luxury co-op did

inexplicably lack security cameras in the halls-but for that very reason its rich tenants would be sure to take notice of comings and goings. If he had lived here for any time at all, his spoor was too diffuse to erase-so he would not have tried. Besides, a monster of that unique and rare kind thrives on the corruption o of innocence. Tough little Karen was simply not

toothsome enough.

At that point I went to the bathroom, and that settled it. When I lifted the seat to urinate I found written on the underside with felt-tip -s pen: "It's so nice to have a man around the ;j house!" The handwriting was hers. She had -a lived alone.

I was relieved, because I hadn't relished thinking about my hypothetical monster or the necessity of tracking and killing him. But I was irritated as hell again.

I wanted to understand.

For something to do I took my steak and a mug of coffee to the study and heated up her terminal. I tried all the typical access codes, her birth date and her name in numbers and such, but none of them would unlock it. Then on a hunch I tried the date of her parents' death, and that did it. I ordered the groceries she needed, instructed the lobby door to accept delivery, and tried everything I could think of to get a diary or a journal out of the damned thing, without success. So I punched up the public ,; library and asked the catalog for Britannica on wireheading. It referred me to brain-reward, auto stimulus of. I skipped over the history, from discovery by Olds and others in 1956 to emergence as a social problem in the late '80s when surgery got simple; declined the offered diagrams, graphs, and technical specs; finally found a brief section on motivations.

There was indeed ,one type of typical user I had overlooked. The terminally ill.

Could that really be? At her age? I went to the bathroom and checked the prescriptions. Nothing for heavy pain, nothing indicating anything more serious than allergies. Back before telephones had cameras I might have conned something out of her personal physician, but it would have been a chancy thing even then. There was no way to test the hypothesis.

It was possible, even plausible-but it just wasn't likely enough to satisfy the thing inside me that demanded an explanation. I dialed a game of four-wall squash, and made sure the computer would let me win. I was almost enjoying myself when she screamed.

It wasn't much of a scream; her throat was shot. But it fetched me at once. I saw the problem as I cleared the door. The topical anesthesia had worn off the large "bedsores" on her back and buttocks, and the pain had waked her. Now that I thought about it, it should have happened earlier; that spray was only supposed to be good for a few hours. I decided that her pleasure-pain system was weakened by overload.

The sores were bad; she would have scars. I resprayed them, and her moans stopped nearly

at once. I could devise no means of securing her on her belly that would not be nightmare inducing, and decided it was unnecessary. I thought she was out again and started to leave. Her voice, muffled by pillows, stopped me in my tracks.

"I don't know you. Maybe you're not even real. I can tell you."

"Save your energy. Karen. You-"

"Shut up. You wanted the karma, you got it."

I shut up.

Her voice was flat, dead. "All my friends were, dating at twelve. He made me wait until fourteen. Said I couldn't be trusted. Tommy came to take me to the dance, and he gave Tommy a hard time. I was so embarrassed. The dance was nice for a couple of hours. Then Tommy started chasing after Jo Tompkins. He just left me and went off with her. I went in the ladies' room and cried for a long time. A

couple of girls got the story out of me, and one of them had a bottle of vodka in her purse. I never drank before. When I started tearing up cars in the parking lot, one of the girls got a hold of Tommy. She gave him shit and made him take me home. I don't remember it, I found out later."

Her throat gave out and I got water. She accepted it without meeting my eyes, turned her face away and continued.

"Tommy got me in the door somehow. I was out cold by then. He must have been too scared to try and get me upstairs. He left me on the couch and my underpants on the rug and went home. The next thing I knew I was on the floor and my face hurt. He was standing over me. Whore he said. I got up and tried to explain and he hit me a couple of times. I ran for the door but he hit me hard in the back. I went into the stairs and banged my head real hard."

Feeling began to come into her voice for the first time. The feeling was fear. I dared not move.

"When I woke up it was day. Mama must have bandaged my head and put me to bed. My head hurt a lot. When I came out of the bathroom I heard him call me. He and Mama were in bed. He started in on me. He wouldn't let me talk, and kept getting madder and madder. Finally I hollered back at him. He got up off the bed and started in hitting me again. My robe came off. He kept hitting me in the belly and tits, and his fists were like hammers. Slut, he kept saying. Whore. I thought he was going to kill me, so I grabbed one arm and bit. He roared like a dragon and threw me across the room. Onto the bed; Mama jumped up. Then he pulled down his underpants and it was big and purple. I screamed and screamed and tore at his back and Mama just stood there. Her eyes were big and round, just like in cartoons. I screamed and screamed and-

She broke off short and her shoulders knotted. When she continued her voice was stone dead again. "I woke up in my own bed again. I took a real long shower and went downstairs. Mama was making pancakes. I sat

down and she gave me one and I ate it, and then I threw it up right there on the table and ran out the door. She never said a word, never called me back. After school that day I found a Sanctuary and started the divorce proceedings. I never saw either of them again. I never told this to anybody before."

The pause was so long I thought she had fallen asleep. "Since that time I've tried it with men and women and boys and girls, in the dark and in the desert sun, with people I cared for and people I didn't give a damn about, and I have never understood the pleasure in it. The best it's ever been for me is not uncomfortable. God, r how I've wondered . . . now I know." She was starting to drift. "Only thing my whole life turned out better'n cracked up to be." She snorted sleepily. "Even alone."

I sat there for a long time without moving. My s legs trembled when I got up, and my hands trembled while I made supper.

That was the last time she was lucid for nearly forty-eight hours. I plied her with successively stronger

soups every time she woke up, and once I got some tea-soggy toast into her. Sometimes she called me others' names, and sometimes she didn't know I was there, and everything she said was disjointed. I listened to her tapes, watched some of her video, charged some books and games to her computer. I took a lot of her aspirin. And drank surprisingly little

of her booze.

It was a time of frustration for me. I still a couldn't make it all fit together, still could not quite understand. There was a large piece missing. The animal who sired and raised her had planted the charge, of course, and I perceived that it was big enough to blow her apart. But why had it taken eight years to go off? If his death four years ago had not triggered it, what had? I could not leave until I knew. I did not know why not. I prowled her apartment like a caged bear, looking everywhere for something else to think about.

Midway through the second day her plumbing started working again; I had to change the sheets. The next morning a noise woke me and I found her on the bathroom floor on her knees in a pool of urine. I got her clean and back to bed and just as I thought she was going to drift off again she started yelling at me. "Lousy son of a bitch, it could have been over! I'll never have the guts again now! How could you do that, you bastard, it was so nice!" She turned violently away from me and curled up. I had to make a hard choice then, and I gambled on what I knew of loneliness and sat on the edge of the bed and stroked her hair as gently and impersonally as I knew how. It was a good guess. She began to cry, in great racking heaves first, then the steady wail of total heartbreak. I had been praying for this and did not begrudge the strength it cost her.

She cried for so long that every muscle in my body ached from sitting still by the time she fell off the edge into sleep. She never felt me get up, stiff and clumsy as I was. There was something

different about her sleeping face now. It was not slack but relaxed. I limped out in the closest thing to peace I had felt since I arrived, and as I was passing the living room on the way to the liquor I heard the phone.

Silently, I looked over the caller. The picture was under contrasted and snowy; it was a pay phone. He looked like an immigrant construction worker, massive and florid and necklaced, almost brutish. And, at the moment, under great stress. He was crushing a hat in his hands; mortally embarrassed.

"Sharon, don't hang up," he was saying. "I gotta find out what this is all about."

Nothing could have made me hang up.

"Sharon? Sharon, I know you're there. Terry says you ain't there, she says she called you every day for a week and banged on your door a few times. But I know you're there, now anyway. I walked past your place an hour ago and I seen your bathroom light go on and off. Sharon, will you please tell me what the hell's going on? Are you listening to me? I know you're listening to me. Look, you gotta understand, I thought it was all set, see? I mean I thought it was set. Arranged. I put it to Terry, cause she's my regular, and she says not me, lover, but I know a gal. Look, was she lying to me or what? She told me for another bill you play them kind of games."

Regular \$200 bank deposits plus a cardboard box full of scales, vials, bags, and milk powder makes her a coke dealer, right, Travis McGee? Don't be misled by the fact that the box was shoved in a corner, sealed with tape, and covered with dust. After all, the only other illicit profession

that pays regular sums at regular intervals is hooker, and \$200 is too much for square-jawed, hook-nosed, wide-eyed little Karen, breasts or no breasts.

For a garden-variety hooker . . .

"Dammit, she told me she called you and set it up, she gave me your apartment number." He shook his head violently. "I can't make sense of this. Dammit, she couldn't be lying to me. It don't figure. You let me in, didn't even turn the camera on first, it was all arranged. Then you screamed and . . . and I done like we arranged, and I thought you was maybe overdoin' it a bit but Terry said you was a terrific actress. I was real careful not to really hurt you, I know I was. Then I put on my pants and I'm putting the envelope on the dresser and you bust that chair on me and come at me with that knife and I hadda bust you one. It just don't make no sense, will you goddammit say something to me? I'm twisted up inside going on two weeks now. I can't even eat."

I went to shut off the phone, and my hand was shaking so bad I missed, spinning the volume knob to minimum. "Sharon, you gotta believe me," he hollered from far far away. "I'm into rape fantasy. I'm not into rape!" And then I had found the right switch and he was gone.

I got up very slowly and toddled off to the liquor cabinet, and I stood in front of it taking pulls from different bottles at random until I could no longer see his face, his earnest, baffled,

half-ashamed face hanging before me.

Because his hair was thin sandy blond, and his jaw was a bit too square, and his nose was a trifle hooked, and his blue eyes were just the least little bit too far apart. They say everyone has a double somewhere. And Fate is such a witty little motherfucker, isn't he?

I don't remember how I got to bed.

I woke later that night with the feeling that I would have to bang my head on the floor a couple of times to get my heart started again. I was on my makeshift doss of pillows and blankets beside her bed, and when I finally peeled my eyes open she was sitting up in bed staring at me. She had fixed her hair somehow, and her nails were trimmed. We looked at each other for a long moment. Her color was returning somewhat, and the edge was off her bones.

"What did Jo Ann say when you told her?"

I said nothing.

"Come on, Jo Ann's got the only other key to this place, and she wouldn't give it to you if you weren't a friend. So what did she say?"

I got painfully up out of the tangle and walked to the window. A phallic church steeple rose above the

low rises, a couple of blocks away.

"God is an iron," I said. "Did you know that?"

I turned to look at her, and she was staring. She laughed experimentally, stopped when I failed to join in. "And I'm a pair of pants with a hole scorched through the ass?"

"If a person who indulges in gluttony is a glutton, and a person who commits a felony is a felon, then God is an iron. Or else He's the dumbest designer that ever lived."

Of a thousand possible snap reactions she picked the most flattering and hence most irritating. She kept silent, kept looking at me, and thought about what I had said. At last she said, "I agree. What particular design fuckup did you have in mind?"

"The one that nearly left you dead in a pile of your own shit," I said harshly. "Everybody talks about the new menace, wireheading, fifth most common cause of death in only a decade. Wireheading's not new-it's just a technical refinement."

"I don't follow."

"Are you familiar with the old cliché 'Everything I like in the world is either illegal, immoral, or fattening'?"

"Sure."

"Didn't that ever strike you as damned odd? What's the most nutritionally useless and physiologically dangerous 'food' substance in the world? Sugar. And it seems to be beyond the power of the human nervous system to resist it. They put it in virtually all the processed food there is, which is next to all the food there is, because nobody can resist it. And so we poison ourselves and whipsaw our depositions and rot our teeth. Isn't that odd? There is a primitive programming in our skulls that rewards us, literally overwhelmingly, every time we do something damned silly. Like smoke a poison, or eat or drink or snort or shoot a poison. Or

overeat good foods. Or engage in complicated sexual behavior without procreative intent, y which if it were not for the pleasure would be m pointless and insane. And which, when pursued for the pleasure alone, quickly becomes pointless and insane anyway. A suicidal brain-reward system is built into us."

"But the reward system is for survival."

"So how the hell did ours get wired up so that survival-threatening behavior gets rewarded best g of all? Even the pro-survival pleasure stimuli are wired so that a dangerous overload produces the ; maximum pleasure. On a purely biological level Man is programmed to strive hugely for more ; than he needs, more than he can profitably use.

"The error doesn't show up as glaringly in other animals. Even surrounded by plenty, a stupid animal has to work hard simply to meet his needs. But add in intelligence and everything goes to hell. Man is capable of outgrowing any ecological niche you put him in-he survives at , all because he is the animal that moves. Given half a chance he kills himself of surfeit."

My knees were trembling so badly I had to sit down. I felt feverish and somehow larger than myself, and I knew I was talking much too fast. She had nothing whatever to say, with voice, face, or body.

"Given Man's gregarious nature," I went on, fingering my aching nose, "it's obvious that . kindness is more pro-survival than cruelty. But which feels better? Which provides more pleasure? Poll any hundred people at random and you'll find at least twenty or thirty who know all there is to know about psychological torture and psychic castration-and maybe two that know how to give a terrific back rub. That business of your father leaving all his money to the Church and leaving you a hundred dollars, the going rate-that was artistry. I can't imagine a way to make you feel as good as that made you feel rotten. That's why sadism and masochism are the last refuge of the jaded, the most enduring of the perversions; their piquancy is-

"Maybe the Puritans were right," she said. "Maybe pleasure is the root of all evil. But God! life is bleak without it."

"One of my most precious possessions," I said, "is a button that my friend Slinky John used to hand-paint and sell below cost. He was the only practicing anarchist I ever met. The button reads: 'GO, LEMMINGS, GO!' A lemming surely feels intense pleasure as he gallops to the sea. His self-destruction is programmed by nature, a part of the very small life force that insisted on being conceived and born in the first place. If it feels good, do it." I laughed, and she flinched. "So it seems to me that God is either an iron, or a colossal jackass. I don't quite know whether to be admiring or contemptuous."

All at once I was out of words, and out of strength. I yanked my gaze away from hers and stared at my knees for a long time. I felt vaguely ashamed, as befits one who has thrown a tantrum in a sickroom.

After a time she said. "You talk good on your feet."

I kept looking at my knees. "I was an economics teacher for a year once."

"Will you tell me something?"

"If I can."

"What was the pleasure in putting me back together again?"

I jumped.

"Look at me. There. I've got a half-ass idea of what shape I was in when you met me, and I can guess what it's been like since. I don't know if I'd have done as much for Jo Ann, and she's my best friend. You don't look like a guy whose favorite kick is sick fems, and you sure as hell don't look like you're so rich you got time on your hands. So what's been your pleasure, these last few days?"

"Trying to understand," I snapped. "I'm nosy."

"And do you understand?"

"Yeah. I put it together."

"So you'll be going now?"

"Not yet." I said automatically. "You're not-"

And caught myself.

"There's something else besides pleasure," she said. "Another system of reward, only I don't think it has much to do with the one I got wired up to my scalp here. Not brain-reward. Call it mind-reward. Call it joy-the thing like pleasure that you feel when you've done a good thing or passed up a real tempting chance to do a bad thing. Or when the unfolding of the Universe just seems especially apt. It's nowhere near as flashy and intense as pleasure can be. Believe me. But it's got something going for it. Something that can make you do without pleasure or even accept a lot of pain to get it.

"That thing you're thinking about, that's there, that's true. What's messing us up is the animal

nervous system and instincts we inherited. But you said yourself, Man is the animal that outgrows and moves. Ever since the first brain grew a mind we've been trying to outgrow our instincts, grow new ones. By Jesus, we will yet. Evolution works pretty slow, is all. Couple of hundred million years to develop a thinking ape, and you want a smart one in a lousy few hundred thou? That lemming drive is there-but there's another kind of drive, another kind of force, that's working against it. Or else there wouldn't still be any people and there wouldn't be the words to have this conversation and-" She looked down at herself. "And I wouldn't be here to say them."

"That was just random chance."

She snorted. "What isn't?"

"Well, that's fine, " I shouted. "That's fine. Since the world is saved and you've got it under control I'll just be going along."

I've got a lot of voice when I yell. She ignored it utterly, continued speaking as if nothing had happened. "Now I can say that I have sampled the spectrum of the pleasure system at both ends-none and all there is-and I think the rest of my life I will dedicate myself to the middle of the road and see how that works out. Starting

with the very weak tea and toast I'm going to ask you to bring me in another ten minutes or so. But as for this other stuff, this joy thing, that I would like to begin exploring, in as much intensity as possible. I don't really know a goddamn thing about it, but I understand it has something to do with sharing and caring, and what did you say your name was?"

"It doesn't matter!" I yelled.

"All right. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing!"

"What did you come here for?"

I was angry enough to be honest. "To burgle your fucking apartment!"

Her eyes opened wide, and then she slumped back against the pillows and laughed until the tears came, and I tried and could not help myself and laughed too, and we shared laughter for a long time, as long as we had shared her tears the night before.

And then straight faced she said. "You'll have to wait a week or two; you're gonna need help with those stereo speakers. Butter on the toast."